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A Study of Representative Critical Evaluations of John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939-1949)

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A STUDY OF REPRESENTATIVE CRITICAL EVALUATIONS OF JOHN STEINBECK'S THE GRAPES OF WRATH (1939-1949)

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BY

Lyle C. Jensen

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Dedicated to the memory of
Dr. Marie Neville Tyson, a
brilliant professor and
cherished friend.

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INTRODUCTION

This study of the criticisms of John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath has been made for the purpose of defining the standards of evaluation which a number of critics have applied in their appraisals of Steinbeck's famous novel. The range of criticisms has been limited to the decade following publication of the novel (1939), for it was in this period that most of the critical attention was given to the craftsmanship in the novel.

It is evident that the critics of this period reached certain areas of agreement concerning The Grapes of Wrath, especially with reference to the literary artistry of the author.

There has also been a definite disagreement among critics centering on the author's philosophy as expressed throughout the book.

This distribution of critical opinion has resulted in a study within specific fields of

reference: areas of general agreement, and areas of disagreement concerned with the philosophy of the novel and also with certain other disputed points.

I: AREAS OF MAJOR AGREEMENT

Most critics have agreed as to the excellence of John Steinbeck's descriptions in The Grapes of Wrath. Some assure us that he was at his best writing purely descriptive passages.

Harry Thornton Moore cites the rhythmical beginning of the novel as representative of Steinbeck's skill.[1]

> In the morning the dust hung like fog, and the sun was red as ripe new blood. All day the dust sifted down from the sky, and the next day it sifted down. An even blanket covered the earth. It settled on the corn, piled up on the tops of the fence posts, piled up on the wires; it settled on the roofs, blanketed the weeds and trees....[2]

One feels the tempo Steinbeck is trying to establish--the slow rhythm suggests the slow movement of the dispirited people.

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[1] Harry Thornton Moore, The Novels of John Steinbeck (Chicago: Normandie House, 1939), p. 54.

[2] John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), p. 6.

A. Kuhl, another early critic, feels Steinbeck's descriptive passages are of great value--he feels they're of such excellence that they will stand the test of being read aloud.[3]

Lincoln R. Gibbs in his essay entitled "John Steinbeck: Moralist," seems most representative of these critics: "Steinbeck's senses are delicate and wonderfully perceptive, as evidenced by what one finds on his pages...he describes in short graphic phrases, with accurately shaded color, with chiaroscuro, outline, and motion."[4]

Analysts of style have tended to agree on the mastery of style exhibited in The Grapes of Wrath. Edwin Berry Burgum, for example, says:

> ...hardly any style practiced today is missing from it. The introductory panels, through which Dos Passos sought to present the background against which the story is written are there. Passages are there in the introspective technique of Joyce; others reminding one of the curt understatement of Hemingway; others which echo the diapason rhetoric of Thomas Wolfe. But at the same time, there are stretches of

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[3] A. Kuhl, "Mostly of The Grapes of Wrath," Catholic World CL (November, 1939), p. 160.

[4] "John Steinbeck: Moralist," (1942), Steinbeck and His Critics, E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker, eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 94.

> narrative which might have come out of Gone With the Wind or a serial in The Saturday Evening Post...By the use of its diverse literary styles, its appeal is directed to virtually every level of taste in the book-reading public.5

Moore believes Steinbeck's style was often unconsciously motivated by the Bible.[6] Such passages as the following support this judgment:

> And all the time the farms grew larger and the owners fewer. And there were pitifully few farmers on the land anymore. And the imported serfs were beaten and frightened and starved until some went home again, and some grew fierce and were killed or driven from the country. And the farms grew larger and the owners fewer. And the crops changed. Fruit trees took the place of grain fields, and vegetables to feed the world spread out on the bottoms: lettuce, cauliflower, artichokes, potatoes--stoop crops. A man may stand to use a scythe, a plow, a pitchfork; but he must crawl like a bug between the rows of lettuce, he must bend his back and pull his long bag between the cotton rows, he must go on his knees like a penitent across a cauliflower patch. And it came about that....7

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5 Edwin Berry Burgum, The Novel and the World's Dilemma (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 283.

6 Moore, op. cit., p. 67.

7 Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 316.

Thus, one can see that the repetitive use of "and," especially at the beginning of the sentence,[8] is in Biblical tradition.

Other critics have stressed the uniqueness of the structure of the work by virtue of the technical device which gives his narrative a wider reference: the interchapter. There are sixteen of these interchapters altogether, spanning nearly one hundred pages. Critics have tended to agree concerning the usefulness of this device. George Snell, for example, believes the interchapter device is useful in "tone-setting."[9] Frederic I. Carpenter believes the interchapters contribute "ideas and interpretations" which in turn give greater significance to the history of the Joads.[10]

Percy H. Boynton supports Carpenter's view by adding: "It is an effective means of dramatizing the thought of a whole group of people faced with

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[8] The Biblical comparison was further developed in the 1960's. See: Fontenrose, Joseph. John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1963.

[9] George Snell, The Shapers of American Fiction 1798-1947 (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1947), p. 195.

[10] Frederic I. Carpenter, "The Philosophical Joads," College English II (1941), p. 316.

a difficult problem."[11] Joseph Warren Beach adds that many of the interchapters found in the novel express a sense of universality—chapter five, for example, wherein the foreclosure scene takes place, is "a kind of parable...what must have gone on a million times all over the world."[12]

> And at last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won't work any more. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop. We have to do it. We don't like to do it. But the monster's sick. Something's happened to the monster.
>
> But you'll kill the land with cotton.
>
> We know. We've got to take cotton quick before the land dies. Then we'll sell the land. Lots of families in the East would like to own a piece of land.
>
> The tenant men looked up alarmed. But what'll happen to us? How'll we eat?
>
> You'll have to get off the land. The plows'll go through the dooryard....[13]

Such a presentation emphasizes the far-reaching effects of foreclosures, and one perceives a

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[11] Percy H. Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 251.

[12] Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction 1920-1940 (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1941), p. 337.

[13] Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 44.

mass of dispossessed people of whom the Joads are part.

Not all agreement was affirmative: the consensus among early critics was that characterization in the novel is primitive. Most influential of the early critics concerned with Steinbeck's characterization was Edmund Wilson. Writing in 1940 he said:

> In The Grapes of Wrath Mr. Steinbeck has summoned all his resources to make the reader feel his human relationship with the family of dispossessed farmers; yet the effect of this, too, is not quite real. The characters of The Grapes of Wrath are animated and put through their paces rather than brought to life; they are like excellent character actors giving very conscientious performances in a fairly well written play. Their dialect is well done, but they talk stagey; and in spite of Mr. Steinbeck's attempts to make them figure as heroic human symbols, you cannot help feeling that they, too, do not exist seriously for him as people. It is as if human sentiments and speeches had been assigned to a flock of lemmings on their way [14] to throw themselves into the sea.

Wilson's stress on defective characterization was echoed by subsequent critics during the decade.

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[14] Edmund Wilson, The Boys in the Back Room (San Francisco: The Colt Press, 1941), p. 49.

Alfred Kazin, writing in 1942, turned Wilson's "lemmings" into "symbolic marionettes."[15] Kazin went on to say that "Steinbeck's people are always on the verge of becoming human, but never do."[16]

Frederick Bracher, writing in 1948, accepted this negative evaluation of the characterization; he however, documented his findings by pointing out that such a "biological slant" was inevitable for a man of Steinbeck's background. Bracher related Steinbeck's long friendship and intellectual association with Edward F. Ricketts, a marine biologist, whom he felt greatly influenced Steinbeck's thinking.[17]

Although in full agreement with his predecessors about the biological attribute of the characterization in The Grapes of Wrath, Bracher pointed out that "the specifically biological flavor shows itself in incidental coloring (biological allusions, metaphors, and analogies)."[18]

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15 Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York: The Cornwall Press, 1942), p. 394.

16 Ibid., p. 397.

17 Frederick Bracher, "Steinbeck and the Biological View of Man," (1948), Steinbeck and His Critics, E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker, eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 183.

18 Ibid., p. 185.

To support his view he cited the following passage from the novel:

> The family met at the most important place, near the truck. The house was dead; but this truck was the active thing. The ancient Hudson, with bent and scarred radiator screen, with grease in dusty globules at the worn edges of every moving part, with hub caps gone and caps of red dust in their places—this was the new hearth, the living center of the family....19

Bracher sees the truck as the nucleus and the Joads like parts of a living cell, surrounding that nucleus.[20]

Thus, the early critics concluded that Steinbeck's characters in The Grapes of Wrath are not significantly complex, but were created merely to enhance the message of the novel.

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19 Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 135.

20 Bracher, op. cit., p. 185.

II: AREAS OF MAJOR DISAGREEMENT

Although the majority of critics have had much to say about the philosophy implicit in the novel, they disagree sharply regarding the work from (1) the Marxian, (2) traditionally American, or (3) subjective, romantic points of view.

Initially critics were quick to judge the book simply as propaganda. A. Kuhl, writing in 1939, is representative of such reviewers as Louis Kronenberger[21] and Ralph Thompson.[22] Kuhl labelled the novel as "left wing" and stated that Steinbeck's book served as a "diatribe on the economic system."[23] He felt the book interpreted conditions unjustly and accentuated without proof.

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[21] Louis Kronenberger, Review of The Grapes of Wrath, Nation, XLVIII (April 15, 1939), p. 441.

[22] Ralph Thompson, Review of The Grapes of Wrath, Yale Review, XXVIII (Summer, 1939), p. viii.

[23] Kuhl, op. cit., p. 164.

However, in examining the criticisms written in the decade after the publication of the novel, it can be seen that treatment of such a subject represented by The Grapes of Wrath was bound to produce a categorizing enmity or support from all sides. It is the purpose of this segment of the paper to examine these criticisms in relation to The Grapes of Wrath.

Some critics applied Marxist criteria in examination of the novel. Freeman Champney stated that Steinbeck fully accepted Marxian dogma: "a steady intensification of class welfare, in which the lines are drawn more and more sharply, compromise and gradualism become less and less possible, until the stand-up-and-slug-it-out day of revolution comes."[24]

In substantial agreement with Champney, Edwin Berry Burgum felt that The Grapes of Wrath not only advertized the instability of our own society, but also possessed a certain universality in that it served as a pattern for world movements for independence.[25]

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[24] Freeman Champney, "John Steinbeck, Californian," The Antioch Review VII (Fall, 1947), p. 350.

[25] Burgum, op. cit., p. 288.

Maxwell Geismar, a third critic of the Marxist persuasion, saw Steinbeck as an "impassioned radical who exploited the ruling classes, who introduced the proletariat to a multitude of model homes, and brought Marx to the doorstep...."[26] To Geismar, "the Joad's jalopy" became "America's new bandwagon."[27]

Geismar felt that Steinbeck's delineation of man's communal good could not merely be dismissed as the "Mah-Jong of the Thirties," for it gave meaning to a decade of social change. He believed the novel to be a true reflection of a sick America:[28]

> The great owners, nervous sensing a change, knowing nothing of the nature of the change. The great owners, striking at the immediate thing, the widening government, the growing labor unity; striking at new taxes, at plans; not knowing these things are results not causes...The causes lie deep and simply--the causes are a hunger of a stomach, multiplied a million times; a hunger in a single soul, hunger for some joy and some security, multiplied a million times; muscles and

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[26] Maxwell Geismar, Writers in Crisis (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), p. 241.

[27] Ibid., p. 268.

[28] Ibid., p. 269.

> mind aching to grow, to work, to create, multiplied a million times...The Western States nervous under the beginning change.[29]

A second interpretation sought to relate the novel to the pragmatic school of nineteenth-century American philosophical thought.

Frederic I. Carpenter found in nineteenth-century American thought in general the roots of the novel's challenge to the status quo. He felt Steinbeck brought together the three great skeins of American thought: one is represented by Emerson's oversoul, faith in the common man, and Protestant self-reliance; the second by Whitman's religion of the love of all men and his mass democracy; and the third by William James' pragmatic emphasis on action.[30]

According to Carpenter, Steinbeck utilizes Casy in translating the thought of the great writers into words of one syllable, and the Joads translate it into action.[31]

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[29] Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 204.

[30] Carpenter, op. cit., p. 317.

[31] Ibid., p. 317.

Carpenter's insight is reinforced by Chester E. Eisinger. He added a fourth skein of American thought to Carpenter's list: the eighteenth-century agrarianism of Thomas Jefferson.[32]

Eisinger traces in The Grapes of Wrath the Jeffersonian view that the farmer is the productive, healthy member of society, drawing spiritual strength as well as sustenance from the soil, and that the city and the machine, essentially inhuman and unproductive, are to be mistrusted.[33] Steinbeck's support of this view is nowhere more evident than in his description of the inanimate monstrosity--the tractor--which has come to take the land:

> The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects, having the incredible strength of insects. They crawled over the ground, laying the track and rolling on it and picking it up. Diesel tractors, puttering while they stood idle; they thundered when they moved, and then settled down to a droning roar. Snub-nosed monsters, raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it, straight down the country, across the

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[32] "Jeffersonian Agrarianism in The Grapes of Wrath," University of Kansas City Review, XIV (Winter, 1947), p. 150.

[33] Ibid., p. 150.

> dooryards, in and out of gullies in straight lines. They did not run on the ground, but on their own roadbeds. They ignored hills and gullies, water courses, fences, houses.
>
> The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was a part of the monster, a robot in the seat....34

Thus, Eisinger concludes that the role of the Okies in a revolutionary social crisis is "as American as Jefferson's successful efforts to abolish entail and primogeniture."[35]

A third interpretation stresses the subjective, romantic elements. In 1946 Woodburn O. Ross stated that although Steinbeck accepted the scientific method of procedure which seeks to limit itself to what is actually observed and to avoid as far as possible all metaphysical considerations, he nevertheless assumed an attitude toward the objective world which is intensely subjective, almost mystical, for he shows "loving acceptance of whatever is."[36] In

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[34] Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 48.

[35] Eisinger, op. cit., p. 150.

[36] Woodburn O. Ross, "John Steinbeck: Earth and Stars," (1946), Steinbeck and His Critics, E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker, eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 168.

addition, Ross points out that this "love" can be extended to include everything which is "natural."[37] To support his view, Ross cites the love of an individual for his land:

> Grampa an' the old place,
> they was jus' the same thing...
> He died the minute you took 'im
> off the place...He was that
> place, an' he knowed it....[38]

Thus, Grampa's identification to the land, as well as the action of the Joads is uninhibited--that is, natural.

Two years later Frederick Bracher insisted that the universal acceptance of mankind propounded by Whitman is central to the entire novel. Bracher offers Casy to support his viewpoint, for to Bracher, Casy is an outsider, a disinterested though friendly observer whose insight reflects the non-teleological attitude:[39]

> "I says, 'Maybe it ain't a sin.
> Maybe it's just the way folks is.
> Maybe we been whippin' the hell
> out of ourselves for nothin'!'. .
> Before I knowed it, I was sayin'
> out loud, 'The hell with it!'
> There ain't no sin and there
> ain't no virtue. There's just

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[37] Ross, op. cit., p. 169.

[38] Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 199.

[39] Bracher, op. cit., p. 186.

> stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say.'"[40]

Bracher points out that this is "a colloquial version of "is" thinking--the attempt to concern oneself not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually is--attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions what or how, instead of why."[41]

Bracher, therefore, sees Casy arriving at the attitude which, for Steinbeck, is essential to the good scientist: "the love and understanding of instant acceptance."[42]

The point of view developed by Ross and Bracher has subsequently been characterized as uniquely valuable: in 1958 Peter Lisca praises them as the only two critics who have succeeded "in taking exactly those materials which had

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[40] Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 31.

[41] Bracher, op. cit., p. 187.

[42] Ibid., p. 187.

provided all the critical cliches about animalism, primitivism, and immorality and reinterpreting them more convincingly as the basis of Steinbeck's humanity, his mysticism, and his reverence for life."[43]

Critics in the first decade also tended to differ significantly in two other matters: (1) Steinbeck's use of symbolism in the novel, and (2) the problem of sentimentality.

Concerning symbolism, there are two specific features of the novel which critics examined: the turtle, which appears in the first interchapter of the book, and Rose of Sharon's sacrificial gesture in the final scene of the novel.

Kuhl, one of the early critics, sees the symbolism of the turtle as being tedious: "...it is as if someone were to describe in detail the process of rending a daisy petal from petal; the reader is strongly tempted to mutter "So what?" Second...the allegory is too plainly trite."[44]

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[43] Peter Lisca, The Wide World of John Steinbeck (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 17.

[44] Kuhl, op. cit., p. 165.

Joseph Warren Beach, however, sees the turtle as a preview of the story which follows. He supports his view by pointing out that the turtle shows a determination similar to the Joad family:

> ...over the grass at the roadside a land turtle crawled, turning aside for nothing, dragging his high-domed shell over the grass...His horny beak was partly open, and his fierce, humorous eyes, under brows like fingernails, stared straight ahead. He came over the grass leaving a beaten trail behind him....45

George Snell agreed with Beach concerning this survival symbolism of the turtle. Snell adds, moreover, that this is a "perfect example of Steinbeck's sensitivity."[46]

The last scene of the novel, wherein Rose of Sharon, her baby having died, gives the milk of her breast to a starving man, caused the greatest consternation among critics.

Early criticism again proved to be quite negative. Clifton Fadiman, for example, wrote

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45 Steinbeck, op. cit., p. 21.

46 Snell, op. cit., p. 195.

in The New Yorker: "the ending is the tawdriest kind of fake symbolism."[47] Others, such as Kuhl said: "that is so much hokum. I am surprised Steinbeck's imagination would stoop to go through so low a door."[48] Most bitter, however, was Edmund Wilson: "Why should the girl give her milk to another wretched victim--to what good that Okies should continue to live on the earth."[49]

Later criticism, however, tended to view the artistry of the symbolism. Beach, for example, praises the symbolism of the gesture: "The final scene is symbolic in its way of what is the leading theme of the book. It is a type of life-instinct, the vital persistence of the common people who are represented by the Joads, the people who are never overwhelmed."[50] Carpenter adds that "Rose of Sharon transmutes her maternal love to a love of all people."[51]

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47 Clifton Fadiman, Review of The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck, The New Yorker, XV (April 15, 1939), p. 81.

48 Kuhl, op. cit., p. 165.

49 Wilson, op. cit., p. 45.

50 Beach, op. cit., p. 332.

51 Carpenter, op. cit., p. 321.

Critics writing towards the end of the decade, such as Claude-Edmonde Magny, do not see any real symbolic meaning. Miss Magny feels that "the book ends on a purely poetic note which in no way brings the plot to a conclusion."[52] Woodburn O. Ross, however, sees it as a dramatic expression of altruism.[53] Burgum tends to agree but adds that the last scene results from a "meretricious desire to italicize the action."[54] Burgum was of the opinion that it could not in any way be symbolic as no preparation had been made for such symbolism in the novel.

The final area of disagreement is that of Steinbeck's use of sentimentality in The Grapes of Wrath.

Joseph Warren Beach feels Steinbeck is very much a sentimentalist: "Steinbeck's sentimentality is a way of regarding humanity, the way of feeling rather than of reason...the flight from

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52 "Steinbeck, or the Limits of the Impersonal Novel," Steinbeck and His Critics, E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker, eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 221.

53 Woodburn O. Ross, "John Steinbeck: Naturalism's Priest," College English X (May, 1949), p. 434.

54 Burgum, op. cit., p. 283.

reason which he has indulged in, has prevented him from seeing reality as it is, in its entire fullness and proportioning and significance."[55]

Although Maxwell Geismar offered no comparable definition of the term, he described the sentimentality in the novel as "overwhelming."[56]

On the other hand, Burgum felt that Steinbeck kept his sentimentality in check until the final scene of the novel;[57] Lincoln R. Gibbs, however, stands alone in his statement that "it is profound and free from a taint of sentimentality."[58]

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55 Beach, op. cit., p. 236.

56 Geismar, op. cit., p. 264.

57 Burgum, op. cit., p. 283.

58 Gibbs, op. cit., p. 103.

III: CONCLUSION

From the foregoing study the following conclusions may be drawn: (1) The total areas of disagreement very nearly equal the total areas of agreement; (2) Of the four areas of agreement, three are affirmative concerning the artistry of the novel (the excellence of description, the stylistic variations used by Steinbeck, and his use of the interchapter device). The fourth area of agreement, that of characterization, is negative: the critics of the decade studied agreed that the novel is defective in character portrayal.

Of the three areas of disagreement, the area dealing with the philosophy implicit in the novel contains the widest range of interpretation, ranging from the extreme Marxist, materialistic, to the romantic, subjective points of view. Representatives of the varying points of view are agreed in praising Steinbeck for his presentation of the point of view which they consider paramount. (The fact that there is such a wide

variety of philosophical attitudes discussed as being basic in the work, may in itself be an indication of the universality of the work as a whole. Substantiating, Joseph Warren Beach points out that the interchapters express a sense of universality.

Of the two remaining areas of disagreement (Steinbeck's use of symbolism, and the incidence of sentimentality), the following conclusions may be drawn: (1) Of the nine critics concerned with symbolism, three deny the presence of symbolism altogether; three condemn the symbolism outright; and, three praise it highly. (2) Concerning the problem of sentimentality, the reaction of the majority of critics is negative: three of the four have objected strenuously to what they apparently regard as a failure of creative imagination; the fourth denies the presence of sentimentality altogether, and correlates the profundity of the work with its freedom from sentimentality.

To sum up: six of the nine groups of critics are positive in their final evaluation of the novel; two of the remaining three are predominately negative; and the third is divided.

APPENDIX A

Steinbeck's Attitude Towards Criticism

Perhaps it would be appropriate to end this paper with Steinbeck's own attitude towards criticism, as he expressed it in 1957:

> ...Much of the criticism with its special terms and parochial approach is interesting to me, although I confess I don't understand it very well, but I cannot see that it has very much to do with the writing of novels good or bad. And since the critics fight each other even more fiercely than they do the strapped down and laid open subjects of their study, it would seem to me that they do not have a table of constants. In less critical terms, I think it is a bunch of crap. As such I am not against it so long as it is understood that the process is a kind of ill tempered parlour game in which nobody gets kissed...I do not read much criticism of my work any more. In the first place it is valueless as advice or castigation since the criticized piece is finished and I am not likely to repeat it. And in the second place, the intrafrontal

disagreements only succeed in puzzling me. Recently a critic proved by parallel passages that I had taken my whole philosophy from a 17th century Frenchman of whom I had never heard...I don't think The Grapes of Wrath is obscure in what it tries to say. As to its classification and pickling, I have neither opinion nor interest. It's just a book, interesting, I hope, instructive in the same way the writing instructed me. Its structure is very carefully worked out and it is no more intended to be inspected than is the skeletal structure of a pretty girl. Just read it, don't count it! 59

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59 John Steinbeck, "A Letter on Criticism," Steinbeck and His Critics, E. W. Tedlock, Jr. and C. V. Wicker, eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), p. 52.

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